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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the methodology used for television audience research by David Morley for his study, "The Nationwide Audience," in which he attempts to systematically determine relationships between the various ways in which different audience groups make sense of television programs and the social relations that define their material conditions of existence. Focusing on the use, nature, and status of the decoding group as representing a key interface between theory and methodology, this discussion examines Morley's rationale for the use of groups rather than individual respondents in his research, and questions whether group work is a necessary condition of applying the encoding/decoding model, what the groups represent in this context, and what these groups do in their role as active, productive audiences. The issues involved in different approaches to the use of groups or individuals in audience research are also discussed. The need to study the decoding of television in terms of real groups operating in specific material conditions, rather than in terms of formally representative entities is then discussed, and examples of areas where decoding already exists as an extended process are provided. It is concluded that the choice between a restricted or extended conception of decoding/encoding--i.e., the individual or group respondent--is not a simple matter of definition but part of the whole way the general parameters and objectives of an audience study are set up. (CGD)

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Constituting the television audience: a problem of method

Paper presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Brunsdon and Morley's Nationwide study has rapidly become something of a classic or model text in the field of television audience research. In particular, David Morley's The Nationwide Audience holds out the possibility of escaping both the exaggerated textual determination of some Althusserian or 'effects' studies and the insufficiently sociological accounts of audience response available from 'uses and gratifications' or certain structuralist approaches. Morley's work attempts to systematically refer the various ways in which different audience groups make sense of a television programme to the social relations which define their material conditions of existence - without reducing the former to a mechanical reflection of the latter. Morley has subsequently described the objective of this research as the construction of an "ethnography of reading" (Morley, 1981,13) and it indeed possesses wide ranging and fundamental connexions with the notable ethnographic tradition of British cultural studies. This ethnography is concerned with investigating the independent cultural systems which people themselves actively create out of, and use to mediate between, received cultural and ideological materials and the material relations within which they exist.

The attempt to broadly follow the Nationwide study in our own audience research[1] required us to pay particular attention to the way this theoretical framework had actually been realised in the design, execution, interpretation and presentation of the empirical research itself. Our aim here is to explore what we now perceive as, if not quite a contradiction between theory and method in Morley's work, then at least the uneasy coexistence of two significantly different approaches to audience study. To simplify, we would say that a largely qualitative, ethnographic theory is concretised and applied through a largely formalist methodology derived from mainstream quantitative research in the social sciences. This tension threatens to obscure and undermine the value and distinctiveness of the work. We suspect that this is by no means an

uncommon phenomenon in qualitative media studies. If we have concentrated on Morley's work, then, it is because of its importance as a model or point of reference and with the aim of clarifying and confirming that importance rather than wishing to discredit it. Finally, we have found it useful to approach the discussion by focussing on the use, nature and status of the decoding group, as representing a key interface between theory and methodology.

1. Why not work with individual respondents?

Morley's explicit answer to this question is couched in terms of escaping individualist research paradigms:

> "the chance to work with groups rather than with individuals (given that resources did not allow us the luxury of both) was made on the grounds that much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context". (Morley, 1980,33)

It is, interestingly, a negative and somewhat ambiguous justification for using groups.

He discusses several representatives of such research, but the classic and most extreme example is probably one he hardly mentions - the public opinion survey as employed in the audience research of the broadcasting authorities themselves. It is not difficult to see why such methods seem to have little to interest ethnographic analyses aimed at uncovering the real processes by which audiences' decodings of television are linked to the social relations they inhabit. Shorn of its considerable sophistication and complexity, the public opinion approach is essentially formalist, measuring its adequacy by the extent to which responses are successfully decontextualised.

The method is typically addressed to formally free and equal individuals, the freedom of action/response of the isolated individuals being the guarantee of their formal equivalence and interchangeability. Respondents are thus interviewed individually to avoid the illegitimate interference of group or other contingent pressures with the freedom of response. Interviews are narrowly restricted to a set of questions uniformly applied to each respondent and carefully designed to avoid ambiguities of meaning in either question or response.. Answers are thus rendered formally equivalent (and can be coded and quantitatively processed) since they have thereby been protected from the interference of contingent or contextual differences affecting the individual researcher, interview or respondent. These answers can then be aggregated to describe collective responses, provided that the selection of respondents is organised to represent proportionately the macroscopic existence of whatever have been identified as the pertinent variables (the representative sample). These variations between otherwise free and equivalent individuals can thus be formally correlated with variations in their otherwise free and equivalent responses. Responses may either be aggregated to provide a simple mass response embracing all variables or comparatively aggregated in terms of any one or more variable(s).

The method itself is not concerned with the initial discrimination between what variables are perceived as pertinent and which contingent, this being the responsibility of a theory viewed as wholly external to the method. It is a matter of indifference to the method whether audience responses are correlated with gender, age or shoe-size. Nor is it concerned with the characterisation of the pertinent variables - how to define differences in social class or ethnicity, etc. Finally, it is not concerned with describing, yet alone explaining, causal relationships between response and variable -

merely with formal (statistical) correlations which may or may not represent causal or relevant connections. It does not therefore offer an account of determining relationships in the real world (though it may be used for this purpose), but a formal 'model' of the real, made out of statistical relations between data. The adequacy of the data and the model to the real is dependent on the adequacy of the theoretical brief given from elsewhere.

In most audience research of this kind, this theoretical brief is rarely made explicit. Common sense perceptions derived from and reproducing consensual, liberal pluralist ideologies are simple built into the methodology as natural, unquestioned assumptions or, in a self-referencing circle, as necessary conditions of methodological rigour - that society can indeed be legitimately regarded as an aggregate of formally free and equal individuals; that their behaviour can best be understood as a function of technical, demographic variables of class, age, gender, ethnicity, taken simply as empirically observable differences between individuals; that individuals share a common, consensual culture which renders meaning unproblematic and transparent; etc. There would thus seem to be little or no common ground between such approaches and the theoretical framework and objectives of an audience research like Morley's based on the encoding/decoding model developed within cultural studies.

Why then have we bothered to spell out a kind of research which is so widely used and familiar within the human sciences and which appears sufficiently crude in its empiricism as to not even merit serious discussion in Morley's account of the traditional paradigms of audience research? It is essentially out of a feeling that qualitative media research is often prone to reject this approach out of hand, unthinkingly.

As we have learnt from Althusser, the simple dismissal of inadequate positions without a thorough setting of accounts can often result in those positions continuing to function unperceived in the work which is most critical of them. We have said that this seems to be the case with The Nationwide Audience, as the terminological continuity in Morley's references to "demographic variables", "sample", etc, might suggest. Firstly, the rejection of theoretical individualism and the absence of statistics is no guarantee of replacing the formalism of a survey approach with a materialist analysis. Secondly, it is not immediately obvious in what sense Morley's actual research does in fact analyse how groups decode television; and whether it could not have equally well been accomplished by working with individual respondents.

2. Is group work a necessary condition of applying the encoding/decoding model?

The necessity for studies of audience decodings to use group respondents has already been questioned by Justin Wren-Lewis. Noting Morley's criticism of the way previous research has often decontextualised the individual, he remarks:

> "This may be true, but it is no reason for interviewing the decoders in groups. Morley is quite right to suggest that an individual's meaning-systems develop through a whole series of social interactions .... He is, however, quite wrong to imply that an 'individually placed interview' necessitates the exclusion of 'social context' while a group-based interview does not". (Wren-Lewis, 1983, 195)

We, too, would affirm that the individual is not a social atom, the simplest irreducible element of social life but, on the contrary, the most complex element, the point at which a multitude of shifting social and cultural determinations converge; and at a level of particularity in their concrete combination that defines the unique 'biography' of

each individual. In principle, then, since the characteristics of individuals are not opposed to 'society' but manifest their social existence, there would appear to be at least no absolute objection here to the use of individual interviews.

For Wren-Lewis their use is obligatory: "it is only by interviewing each subject (as a product of a whole range of societal variables) individually that analysis can establish societal variables within decoding practice". (ibid, 195). While his defence of this assertion touches on a number of crucial issues, however, they are somewhat misrepresented by being raised within an empiricist framework.

His argument starts from a common-sense naturalism: "since the first stage of decoding television usually takes place on an individual basis or familial basis, it is appropriate to interview audiences on that basis". (ibid, 195). This is neither here nor there: "appropriate" is a long way from "necessary", while families are hardly individuals. Having already selected the individual as the respondent, however, Wren-Lewis can now reject group interviews for 'interfering' with the individual response - in line with public-opinion orthodoxy:

> "If the members of a decoding group move towards a unifiable position, it is difficult to gauge how much this is an effect of group dynamics. Do, for example, certain dominant members of the group structure the readings of the group as a whole? The individually based interview circumvents this problem". (ibid, 195)

Despite the fact that group 'interference' becomes a meaningless notion if decoding is a group activity, there are real issues concealed here. The first is in the reference to the unifiability of a group's decoding. The second is in the earlier reference to "the first stage of decoding

television" and the admission that "it would be even more revealing to trace the decoding subject's path through 'the conditions in which actual opinions are formed, held and modified'". (ibid, 195). This at least raises the possibility that decoding might sensibly be considered a more extended process than the individual's initial reading of a text and a process only possible through social interaction. We shall return to both these points later.

More fundamentally, much of Wren-Lewis's article involves taking Morley to task for pre-determining the results of his research. This, it is argued, follows firstly from Brunsdon and Morley having started with analysis of the text's 'preferred reading' - "the sense in which a text can be seen to be organised in such a way as to narrow down the range of potential meanings that it can generate". (Morley, 1981, 3). For Wren-Lewis this preferred reading should, in a naturalistic way, be the reading preferred by the readers, constructed a posteriori from the range of individual decodings: "the analyst's task is to construct a series of 'preferred readings' from the material gathered after the interviewing has taken place". (Wren-Lewis, 1983, 195).

Secondly, "the data itself is weighted by the organisation of groups in terms of socio-economic variables". (ibid, 194). Morley himself acknowledges having concentrated in practice on class to the relative exclusion of other determinants (as he also admits subsequent doubts on the nature of preferred readings). But Wren-Lewis's criticism is broader. For him, to work with groups is to have to select or organise them and the criteria used in this effectively pre-judge what are the pertinent variables shaping decoding. The solution is to use individual interviews and avoid the problem, drawing up a list of relevant variables after the event to explain the variety of their decodings.

Again, genuine issues are here poorly formulated. Working with individuals does not avoid the need to pre-structure respondents if a representative sample is required for the results to have general validity. More importantly, both of Wren-Lewis's criticisms are manifestations of the empiricist illusion that theory must only intervene after the event to explain 'facts' otherwise untouched by human hand. Morley's privileging of certain variables (class or gender over eye colour or height) is not, as Wren-Lewis has it, a mistake attributable to human fallibility but, as Morley has it, the application of a theoretical framework derived from accumulated empirical evidence. Theory does not meddle with the authenticity of the facts; it is what enables data to be unearthed and recognised.

What is really at stake here is not the empiricist opposition between theory and facts but the relationship between different levels of anlaysis and abstraction, and how one moves from the empirical to the general. While the choice between the individual or the group as the focus of study is a real and important one, it involves the more fundamental question of whether the chosen 'object of study' is analysed in its own right as a specific complex structure of multiple determinations, or as formally representative of the operation of one or more conceptually separable, social structural factors.

3. What do groups represent?

By considering this problem of how to generalise from empirical data, we can thus further clarify the still open question of whether this kind of audience research proposed by Morley requires or 'prefers' individual or group respondents. In the case of individual interviews, for example, how is one to interpret an individual's reading of a television text, given that she/he is to be seen as the product of multiple social determinations? How is one to generalise the reading made by, say, a black,

working class woman so that one can discriminate between the respective effectivities of ethnicity, class or gender?

Set up in this way, the problem calls for a comparative study, firstly of the readings made by other black, working class women; secondly, between these and the readings made by black, working class men (the differences representing the effectivity of gender on decoding); then between both these and the decodings by white, working class women and men (revealing 'ethnicity') and so on. That is to say, the procedure involves the two moments of grouping together formally equivalent ind-idivuals to define the commonality in their decoding; and of comparing two groupings, differing in respect of one variable, to define the diff-erences in their decodings. The procedure also assumes some practical and legitimate method of breaking down the unity of a given decoding (the attempt to make coherent sense of the text) into formally discrete aspects which could be differentially attributed to appropriate social variables. One can thus see how one would be lead inexorably back towards the system of cross-correlations between demographic variables and broadly categorised (ie: coded) responses, typical of the opinion survey - albeit now more sophisticated in its sociological theory of the audience and its ideological analysis of decodings.

We would argue that the above is very close to what the empirical study of The Nationwide Audience does. We would see nothing intrinsically 'wrong' in such an approach if this is indeed what you want to do. The point is, however, that the whole of Morley's theoretical account suggests that his objective (an "ethnography of reading") is something quite different from or more elaborate than what he characterises as "a fairly banal exercise" of recording "correlations and patterns". (Morley, 1980, 17)

In fact, it is not a case of 'either/or' but the tension between the two approaches that structures Morley's study, a tension that is apparent in the status and treatments of the audience groups. On the one hand, the groups are reported to be real social entities with an existence independent of the research and they frequently exhibit an unstructured, empirical mix of gender, age and ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, every group is formally categorised as possessing, and analysed as a function of, a homogeneous class identity; while Morley points out that he "attempted to construct a sample of groups" which would be likely to represent a range of different decodings. (ibid, 26).

From this point of view, the real complexity of each group and of its collective decodings of the text is not the object to be investigated but a problem to be circumvented. Differences in the sociological characteristics and decodings of individuals within any group are presented as inessential factors to be stripped away in order to reveal their common identity:

> "I can only reiterate my view that those are subsidiary differences.... differences which are to be acknowledged but which, I would argue, do not erase the patterns of consistency and similarity of perspective within groups". (ibid, 138)

The groups thus effectively operate not as real social entities but as convenient and non-essential methodological devices. Each group is little more than an economical way of formally aggregating individuals with a a common class position in order to reveal the common decoding corresponding to this beneath the empirical diversity of individual responses. We can see absolutely no reason (other than economical use of resources) why this could not have been done by interviewing the individuals separately.

The same pattern is visible in the way the problem of context is handled. One would expect any materialist study of how different social groups decode television to pay particular attention to contextual questions - from the groups' immediate conditions of existence to the broad socio-historical and cultural context. Morley's groups, however, are treated less as real participants in a specific socio-historical environment than as research respondents who merely formally represent the 'genuine' social groups existing elsewhere and at a more fundamental level (ie: class).

It is, in fact, neither possible nor necessary for the survey model of research to tackle contextual questions adequately. Respondents inhabit a largely technical, abstract space in which context only intervenes as a possible external source of interference with the unconstrained response of the individual. Firstly, then, Morley radically reduces context from being the material conditions of existence of social agents to what he calls "situational variables" (ibid, 27) in the immediate context of the decoding and interviews. Secondly, these situational variables are only significant if they do, indeed, vary from one respondent to the next. Now all of Morley's groups exist within the educational system as classes of students following various courses (it is in fact the relative vocational or cultural specificity of the courses which accounts for the class homogeneity of each group). Since all groups are interviewed in 'the same' educational context, however, this is a situational constant which can formally be ignored. It is thus only in anticipating similar audience research being done in a different environment that Morley admits the relevance of contextual factors and then only in this reduced sense of situational variables (ibid, 27).

It is this tension between the real or merely formal status of the decoding groups that Wren-Lewis is gesturing towards in the arguments discussed earlier. Recognising only the survey model of research, however, he can only see the group interviews as unnecessary or illegitimate. His call for a return to the concrete individual thus threatens to reduce the (ambiguous) complexity of Morley's research, by removing the ethnographic dimension in which the groups have, potentially, a quite different status.

In this he appears to have Morley's own support. In his retrospective evaluation of the Nationwide study, Morley recognises the problem of the groups' empirical or formal status:

> "There is a problem about the relation of empirically observable groups to the concept of class:- within the study the groups are referred to in such a way as to grant them implicitly a representative status - they are taken to stand for segments of society - in this case, classes". (Morley, 1981,9)

His conclusion, however, is only that his study failed to meet the norms of scientificity required by the representative survey:

> "Minimally, given the small size of the sample studied, there is a problem about generalising the conclusions of the study in any way which took for granted the representative nature of the groups - the groups could only be taken to have a potentially illustrative function". (idem)

What we would argue, nonetheless, is that in terms of the research project and objectives developed in the opening theoretical sections of The Nationwide Audience, it is not the decision to work with groups that is at fault nor the rigour of the representative sample which is at stake.

It is rather that the use of the survey model itself compromises the ethnographic, qualitative and contextually specific aspects of the research by radically abstracting from the real material complexity of the groups.

This entanglement of the two approaches is thus also visible in an apparent contradictoriness in the relation between the hypotheses, research and conclusions of the study. As we've seen, the groups effectively represent class positions. What the study is thus able to compare is the relationship between the different class positions and the different decodings of the groups. This is in line with the first hypothesis of the research that "decodings might be expected to vary with: 1) Basic socio-demographic variables". (Morley, 1980, 26). The conclusion drawn from the research, however, is "Thus, social position in no way directly correlates with decodings". (ibid, 137).

Now this failure to find a correlation does not of course disqualify the research in any sense - negative results are every bit as important as positive ones. Indeed, this absence of any correlation confirms one of the research's premises which appears at least superficially at odds with its own hypothesis - the critique of what Morley calls "sociologism" which "attempts to immediately convert social categories (eg: class) into meanings (eg: ideological positions) without attention to the specific factors governing this conversion". (ibid, 19)

The trouble here is that by stripping down the real social complexity of the groups in favour of studying correlations with a formal variable, the research is not effectively empowered to demonstrate more than this absence of a correlation. The influence of a largely inappropriate research model thus deflects the research from its primary objectives detailed

in the statement of hypotheses cited above:

> "decodings might be expected to vary with ... 2) Involvement in various forms of cultural frameworks and identifications, either at the level of formal structures and institutions ... or at an informal level in terms of involvement in different sub-cultures ... Given a rejection of forms of mechanistic determination, it is at this second level that the main concerns are focussed". (ibid, 19).

What Morley actually seeks to demonstrate is that there is in fact a material relationship (and not just a formal correlation) between social position and decodings but not a direct, mechanical one. To do this he has to demonstrate that (a) decodings have some regular connection with institutional or subcultural factors (the proper level of ethnographic study); (b) these factors themselves have some material connection with broader social categories like class; (c) decodings do not directly correspond to these categories. In the relative absence of genuine ethnographic analysis, he can only demonstrate (c) effectively, which on its own is simply negative, inconclusive and unable to support the arguments of (a) and (b). This is emphatically not to suggest that the ethnographic dimension of (a) is absent from the research, but that it is not systematically realised by a methodology whose concerns lie elsewhere.

We would accept as wholly reasonable, Morley's contention that some of the decodings reflected the influence of working class populism, trade union and Labour Party politics, black youth cultures, etc. We do not feel, however, that the existence of such relationships, yet alone their nature and significance, is systematically and satisfactorily elicited, demonstrated, interpreted or explained in the book. Nor is this likely to emerge from a methodology which treats the decoding groups as decontextualised aggregates of individuals, or whose focus is on representative correlations between

one-dimensional class positions and monolithic formal responses to a text (either 'dominant, negotiated, or oppositional', following Parkin's scheme).

4. What do groups do?

Rather than emphasising what groups represent, then, it might be better to concentrate on what groups do. This stress on the active, productive role of audiences would seem at least more in tune with the distinctive character of the encoding/decoding model from which Morley's research begins. A possible objection, however, is that by focussing on the group in its own right one thereby loses the connections with the broad social structural factors like class which have, even if indirectly, a determining influence on the way people decode television.

We would argue, on the contrary, that this is only a problem if one insists on thinking of class as a 'thing' exercising some external effect on another 'thing' - the group. The complex structure of social relations within an audience group constitutes the immediate context and material conditions in which decoding takes place and, as uses and gratifications approaches could tell us, one ignores them at one's peril. Despite what uses and gratification approaches might tell us, however, in studying these social relations one is studying nothing other than a moment in the material existence of class. Class is internal to the group; and while its existence extends far beyond, it is always embedded in the material practices of other institutional, subcultural and organisational forms apart from which it could have no empirical existence. It is perhaps true that we more naturally think of class on the 'macro' level - as the structural tendencies objectively installed in the social system as a whole; or as the broad strategic co-ordinations of 'local' social relations, which have the capacity to reproduce or significantly transform this social

structure. But is is just as valid and important to understand class at the level of that vast and shifting network of social relations within and between the nodal points of formal and informal institutions, organisations and subcultural groups.

What we would suggest is that Morley's reliance on a representative survey model makes it difficult for him in practice to treat class as anything but a set of external determining constraints on the audience - despite his theoretical disavowals of this position. Correlations and relationships whereby a group stands for a class are formal external relations between separate phenomena. Insofar as these are taken to signify the existence of real relations, then, these too appear as an external connection between class 'over there' and the activity of human beings 'over here'. Social determination thus appears as a process acting on human beings rather than a human process. It would perhaps be better to think of social determination as Marx's "Iron Law of Tendency" - a process which is real and operative but only ever so through the actions of human beings which may realise, inflect or completely negate its effects.

The problem emerges visibly in Morley's attempts to define the determining chain 'class - subcultural discourse - decoding' in a non-deterministic way. Clearly, to simply insert the mediating term of subcultural discourse between class and decoding no more changes the mechanistic nature of their relationship than does extending a line of touching snooker balls. Morley therefore argues that what class determines is not which discourse the decoder mobilises in engaging with a television text, but "the structure of access to difference discourses" (ibid, 134). Now this is close to the idea of tendency only realised through conscious human action. But coming at it from the direction of

the one way determining effect of class on human action and in terms of the opposition of determination to human action, there is no way Morley can think through the nature and unity of the human, social processes at work. What he is left with is an area of untheorised, statistical indeterminacy, representing a formal balance between equally unreal extremes of arbitrary human action or determinism:

> "That such relations are only probabilistic is clear (ie: it is simply more likely that a person ins social position X will have access to a particular form of cultural competence than a person in position Y)" (Morley, 1981, 9)

The question 'what does the group do?' avoids some of these difficulties by stressing both the investigation of empirical relations rather than formal ones and the constitutive role of the audience group's activity. To use Morley's favoured metaphor, it involves the study of cultural 'performance' rather than cultural 'competence', what people actually do rather than what they can do. Decoding is thus not thought of in terms of the formal possibilities and limits of interpretation inherent in the discourses available to a particular group. Turned on its head, the question is the more empirical 'what does this audience group do with the text it chooses to watch and what discourses does it mobilise in the process?' This is also to say that the ideological discourses and social relations which define the group and constitute the immediate conditions in which decoding occurs are not taken as simply given or fixed determinants of the decoding but as conditions which are capable of being changed in and by the decoding process.

This is perhaps the key lesson brought home to us by our own work with audience groups, and the target of an ethnographic approach. The process of negotiating a collective decoding of a text in an established audience

group involves it in a considerable work of clarification and renegotiation of its own 'internal' discourses. Ultimately, these changes are also materialised in changes in its own social hierarchies, practices, etc. Such changes, moreover, cannot be understood as simply internal to the group insofar as they are necessarily transmitted, via both individuals and group practices, to other, 'neighbouring' institutions and informal organisations. In this sense, then, the process of decoding can also be understood as a contributory moment in the reproduction/transformation of that pattern of ideological, cultural and organisational practices which defines a class at any given point.

One must, of course, be careful not to overestimate the actual extent of these processes and their effects. Firstly, they are heavily concentrated in the group at a discursive level and are likely to achieve more material effects only when repeatedly confirmed - either extensively over a period of time, or intensively by the same changes taking place simultaneously across a range of groups. Secondly, while this corrects a certain one-sided stress on determining conditions in thinking about decoding, even the incremental effects of these 'counter-determinations' are, except in exceptional circumstances, likely to be marginal inflections and resistances to the sheer dead-weight of the existing, broader forms of social organisation. This having been said, these processes are real and observable, at the discursive level and beyond, even in the study of 'one-off' decodings. They therefore require taking into account if only in order to understand the process of textual decoding and its results.

This requires that decoding is treated, theoretically and in practice, as a genuinely social process. That is to say, the collective decoding arrived at by the group is necessarily different from that which any

individual member could have produced. This is because the group decoding is constructed through a series of interactions between a progressively modified reading of the text and the progressively re-negotiated identification and definition of the appropriate discourses through which it is to be read. It is here that the ultimate justification for using group interviews lies, and, indeed, something approaching this does form part of Morley's declared motive for using groups:

> "The aim was to discover how interpretations were collectively constructed through talk and the interchange between respondents in the group situation - rather than to treat individuals as the autonomous repositories of a fixed set of individual 'opinions' isolated from their social context" (Morley 1980, 33)

Nonetheless, this aim is not, we feel, fully followed through in the way he presents the empirical record of the group decoding process, where it is again compromised by the pressures of a methodological formalism. What tends to be demonstrated is very much 'decoding' in the sense of a finished product and the component parts of that product, rather than 'decoding' as a process and the substantive ideological shifts which mark the stages of that process. In practical terms, this would require a much fuller presentation of the decoding process for each group (but then the need for a representative range of groups to be discussed would not be pressing); and the identification of each individual's contributions to discusions in order to be able to follow the negotiated shifts of ideological position/reading. In theoretical terms, it requires the replacement of formalist conceptualisations of decoding as (1) a simple reader/text relations and (2) a formal relation of 'fit' or 'mis-match' between decoding and preferred reading.

How should one define the decoding process? One response is to follow the naturalistic argument of Wren-Lewis in restricting the moment of decoding to the actual viewing and accompanying reading of the television text - necessarily conducted by the individual even if in the company of others. Any encounter with other interpretations, commentaries, discourses either during or subsequent to this process is thus regarded as a related but different process - the general ideological discussion, elaboration, modification of an already completed decoding. Decoding is thus established as a tightly enclosed circle of text and reader in which the preferred reading of the text and the reader's cultural competence converge to define 'the' final meaning of the text. Such a view is already implicit in the artificial terminological symmetry of the 'encoding/decoding' description. Despite the fact that the interest in and value of this model is that it restores some active, constitutive role to the audience, this seems a singularly 'inactive' or unproductive form of activity since it only leads back to texts. What do audiences do? Watch television.

Alternatively, since the decoding made by any individual is already a socially formed reading, one could reject this naturalism and regard decoding as a group activity. Decoding now appears as a more extensive, indefinite process - even perhaps renewable in different group contexts. If it could be said to have a definite endpoint (rather than simply stopping), this would be the arrival at a group consensus - or at least an agreement to differ - on the nature of the decoding. Decoding now also involves the collective discussion of more general ideological positions, while remaining identifiably a process of decoding through its repeated return to the text as the common reference point, agenda and target of that discussion..

This extended definition of decoding involves the more productive activity of a collective 'appropriation of meaning' - more productive since it leads outwards to the uses made of televisual representations and hence to their immediate practical effects. In this sense, decoding is not a simple text-reader relation but two simultaneous and interacting series of negotiations - progressively defining and reconstructing the meaning of the text through collective negotiation of individual 'part readings'; while progressively redefining the nature and unity of the group through the collective negotiation of a textual decoding. To draw illustrations from our own research, we could cite the group of college catering students where the decoding of a current affairs text was only constructed through the establishment of a hierarchy of importance between their collective self-identification as young workers or as students - with consequent implications, also discussed, for the kinds of organisational and practical involvements they entered into with other groups of students or workers. Or again, the case of a radically heterogeneous group of 'the unemployed' where the struggle to arrive at a consensus decoding of the text was simultaneously a process of recasting the conventional ideological and social relations inherited by the group and exploring the often unexpected alliances, hierarchies and relationships which might define and structure a subculture of the unemployed.

In all this, there is of course a danger of falling in with what seems to be a current, populist revival of uses and gratifications approaches. Here the role of the television text is wholly neglected in favour of generally unstructured accounts of 'television talk', of what people do with television. Firstly, then, it is important to reaffirm that the material with which the groups engage through the kinds of negotiations illustrated above is not simply 'television' or 'programmes' but a

specific text. That is to say, it is with a structured system of representations which only retain their relative ideological coherence if read in one of a limited number of ways (the 'preferred reading'). To be sure, in decoding a specific text it is possible and common for audiences to fragment and restructure this ideological coherence to a greater or lesser extent. But this is always at the cost of problematising the text itself, of opening up contradictions and incoherencies between textual elements where before there was only seamless continuity, of creating lacunae where representations not present in the text are required to sustain the ideological coherence of the decoding, of rendering elements of the text redundant, etc.

It is generally the effort to account for these contradictions, gaps, redundancies - perceived as features of the text - which powers the decoding group's discussion and drives it further afield. In so doing, it can begin to reveal (to the group as well as the researcher) the real source of these 'textual' discrepancies in discrepancies between the dominant codes of the text and those effectively but often unconsciously operating in the group. As a result, the group begins to articulate, define, refine and consciously reappropriate 'their own' ideological and cultural discourses, with the further potential effects noted earlier.

The general point here is that the audience's (always incomplete, unfinished) reappropriation and redefinition of their own discourse and identity is only achieved through the struggle to appropriate and redefine a structured text. This process can therefore hardly be adequately analysed without adequate understanding of and reference to the available textual materials through and on which it works. Beyond this, we cannot do better than, like Morley, quote Neale's view of what is required if

what people do with television is to become properly intelligible:

> "What has to be identified is the use to which a particular text is put, its functions within a particular conjuncture, in particular institutional spaces, and in relation to particular audiences". (quoted in Morley 1980, 18)

Nonetheless, although Morley upholds in principle this stress on the particular and specific, in practice it is undermined by his insistence on using Parkin's tripartite model of 'dominant, negotiated and oppositional' readings. This is despite his prior recognition of its inadequacy as "a logical rather than a sociological statement of the problem ... providing us with the notion that a given section of the audience either shares, partly shares, or does not share the dominant code in which the message has been transmitted". (ibid, 20). The continued use of the schema is consistent with the way the actual research of The Nationwide Audience is designed to investigate the existence of formal correlations between preferred meaning, decoding and class position. The formalism of the schema, however, is not adequate to the more ethnographic and extended conception of decoding, where it is the substantive ideological content of the decoding which is of interest.

A marginally better recasting of the schema would be to view all decoding as negotiation with a preferred reading, though the effects of that negotiation might be to broadly reproduce, inflect or negate it. By putting all decodings on the same level rather than allocating them to mutually exclusive pigeon-holes, this at least has the following advantages. It requires, firstly, that one defines the substantive ideological relationship between text and decoding - how the text is appropriated rather than whether there is a 'fit' or not. Secondly, it enables one to handle the vast empirical diversity of possible relations between decodings and

preferred readings without an endless taxonomic proliferation of sub-categories to formally classify them, which is the solution recommended by Morley (ibid, 20-21). Thirdly, and more particularly, it allows one to think through the potential for ideological resistance contained in any and all negotiations with dominant codes.

For Morley, this resistance tends to be identified with Parkin's 'oppositional' category and thought of largely as an absolute refusal of the text's preferred reading - either by the substitution of a relatively coherent, 'radical' alternative or by simple non-engagement with the text, as with his group of black students. We would suggest that this resistance to dominant codes is more commonly carried and expressed within those codes and discourses themselves. It exists less in the form of cogently articulated, systematic discourses brought to bear on the text from outside; but rather in the practical effects of a largely implicit level of discourse concealed/expressed within inflections of the language, representations and coherence of the dominant codes themselves and only articulated in a fragmentary way. What we have referred to as the group's conscious reappropriation of its own discourse is essentially the articulation of these implicit resistences in the discussive forms necessary to their conscious and practical use.

For example, in the decoding of current affairs television it is in our experience common for the effective if inconsistently sustained presence of an oppositional discourse to be signalled and expressed through the vocabulary of 'bias'. Brought to light and elaborated, this discourse evokes quite radical challenges to the professional authority, practices and ideologies of broadcasters, to dominant representations of 'normal' and 'legitimate' politics, and so on. However, since 'bias' is defined

within the dominant codes of current affairs television in terms of impartiality, balance, even-handedness, etc, and broadcasting is generally irreproachable at this level, it is easy for researcher and decoding group - but particularly for the individual decoder - to miss the presence of this discourse or recognise only an 'innacurate' decoding of the text.

We would see a major objective of ethnographic audience research as the eliciting and identification of this level of discourse and resistance. For it is here that one finds revealed the 'differentia specifica' which inflects decodings from the preferred reading of the text. Morley's discussion of the group's "structure of access to discourses" is, in this respect, potentially misleading. It may be taken to imply that the discourses a group brings to bear on the text are simply ready made or explicit; or that these discourses are already the group's own, that their employment by the group does not also involve it (to a greater or lesser extent) in ideological struggle with these discourses as well as with those of the text. A text, for example, whose preferred reading involves the condemnation of strikes may be read by a group through 'the' discourse of trade unionism. But one cannot anticipate the decoding that results, whether it will broadly reproduce or challenge the preferred reading, insofar as trade union discourse is itself the contradictory articulation of a dominant 'responsible' trade unionism with a subordinate and less formalised 'wild' trade unionism. The processes of decoding we have been discussing here would involve the group in 'placing' itself ideologically and hence practically in the discourses and practices of trade unionism.

Finally, this eliciting of a partially submerged and fragmentary level of discourse has a number of practical methodological implications which are worth mentioning. Firstly, it turns to advantage the 'problem' that decoding groups in a research context tend to produce more critical readings of texts than might otherwise be the case. While we would emphasise the need to investigate real social groups with an existence independent of the research, this is not however to condone the naturalistic illusion that the research enterprise does not intervene in that reality. What one is engaged in in this case is merely intensifying and focussing on existing processes.

Secondly, any academic research involving interviews with respondents will tend to 'interpellate' them as responsible, serious, official subjects and elicit responses framed within the respondent's perception of official discourse. This is, however, clearly a particular problem here. Working with independently existing groups with a sense of collective identity and solidarity mitigates the difficulty, as does use of the informal, non-directive interview, outlined by Morley, where the group sets the agenda, frames its discussion in its own language, etc, and where the interviewer's role is largely restricted to seeking elaborations and clarifications of meaning. It would also seem important to interview the group on its own ground wherever possible. Significantly for The Nationwide Audience, however, our own experience suggests it may be almost impossible to escape the double confirmation of an academic role involved in the use of an educational context.

5. Conclusion - a 'uses and effects' approach?

We would stress again the need to study the decoding of television in terms of real groups operating in specific material conditions, rather than in terms of formally representative entities. We therefore readily acknowledge that the value of ethnographic audience study and its extended conception of decoding is radically reduced if it is not the case that people commonly use television in the ways we have discussed. Now it would be hard to deny that for much, if not most, of the receiving of television, decoding is a process that ends with the individual's reading and interpretation of the text.

Equally, however, there are important areas where the decoding of texts is accompanied by a commentary and discussion through which viewers negotiate their ideological and social relations with one another. The most widespread and obvious example would be the family; although, in both its socio-cultural characteristics and its relation to television, it is something of a special case compared with other institutional and sub-cultural forms. A second area where decoding already exists as an extended process could be categorised in terms of particular textual genres. Again, the most familiar example would be soap operas and melodramas. Their quasi-real status of something like an experimental social simulation fosters and almost requires the continually renewed intervention between episodes of a public debate of the text and its moral messages - a process confirmed and complicated by contributions to that debate by the media themselves.

A third set of examples might be found where the collective ethos or practices of a sub culture or institution are commonly carried over into the group viewing and discussion of relevant programmes: pop music and

youth audiences, television coverage of football, etc. Finally (though the list is not meant to be exhaustive) there are those cases, most easily associated with current affairs television, where specific issues or events are felt by particular audiences to be sufficiently important to their interests to 'naturally' call for collective viewing and evaluation of their representations on television - often over a relatively extensive period: key elections, the more intense social, industrial and political struggles, moments of national crisis, etc.

The choice between a restricted or extended conception of decoding, the individual or group respondent, then, is not a simple matter of definition but part of the whole way one sets up the general parameters and objectives of audience study. It might be argued that the examples of decoding given above are all special cases and that the findings of any study which concentrates on them would thus not be representative of the more restricted and mundane character of decoding in general. In our view, however, while the results may not be <u>representative</u>, they are likely to be more <u>typical</u> of the general nature of decoding, as well as (and because) more illuminating. What are revealed in the extended, group processes of decoding are the same (typical) laws and processes which govern the restricted decoding of the individual viewer, but more fully realised and thus more visible and intelligible as social processes.

This is also to say that it does not strike us as <u>all</u> that valuable to know how and why Mr Brown and Ms Smith decoded the same text differently, unless we also know <u>what difference it makes</u>. The effects of that difference will be present in the individual's marginal ideological restructuring which will also have the latent potential to affect the reproduction of the formal and informal organisations in which she/he

participates. But it hardly needs saying that it is almost impossible to discern meaningful effects at this level of particularity. We have tried to suggest one way in which it is possible to begin to discern these effects in cases like those listed above - where, of course, 'effects' are to be understood as the ideological and social changes actively brought about by audiences, in the process of using and adapting television representations to rethink and reorganise their own conditions of existence.

Note

1. In 1984, we ran an ESRC-funded research project on the media's role in shaping public opinion during the Chesterfield by-election. As one part of this wider research, we attempted an informal replication of the Nationwide study. This involved the screening and discussion of a Newsnight election broadcast with around a dozen audience groups drawn from the Chesterfield community. While this research did not correspond precisely either to Morley's study nor to the alternative approach suggested here, the arguments of this paper are drawn largely from our experience at this time.

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